

Inspecting the Inspectors

By Stephen Barr

A House subcommittee yesterday delved into long-standing tensions on how best to ensure the independence of the government's inspectors general so that they don't end up as lapdogs to their agencies, reluctant to prowl for waste, fraud and abuse.

The hearing sought the views of the Bush administration and current and former inspectors general on a bill introduced by Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Tenn.) that would enhance the independence of inspectors general.

The tensions on whether inspectors general are less watchdog and more lapdog these days emerged in the opening round of the hearing, when Rep. Brad Miller (D-N.C.) asserted that the Bush administration has politicized and "dumbed down" the inspector general corps, making appointments that he said do not meet professional standards set in the 1978 law that created the positions.

Miller singled out Robert W. Cobb, the NASA inspector general, who has been under investigation by the House Science and Technology Committee for more than six months. Miller described Cobb as having no experience in audits and investigations, as

"a tyrant to his own staff"

and

"a sycophant"

to senior NASA officials, including the former administrator, Sean O'Keefe.

Despite calls for Cobb's resignation, Miller said that Clay Johnson III, a deputy director at the Office of Management and Budget and chairman of an interagency inspector general council, had left disciplinary action up to the new head of NASA, Michael D. Griffin. This renewed questions about whether Cobb could act independently in the interests of taxpayers.

Johnson called Miller's assertions "totally wrong," saying that the administration had not dumbed down inspectors general and that the quality of their work was as high as ever.

As for Cobb, Johnson said he had "never heard" any concerns about the quality of his work, suggesting it was unfair to conclude that an inspector general who has lunch with the agency head will let that affect audits and investigations.

Cobb appeared this month before a House-Senate panel and disputed allegations that he is abusive, vulgar, unprofessional and beholden to top management at NASA. He said criticism from a peer review had not been based on the facts.

Yesterday's hearing was called by Rep. Edolphus Towns (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House subcommittee on government management. He said questions had been raised about the independence and accountability of inspectors general in recent years and that he wanted to examine how they could be addressed.

Inspectors general at large agencies are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate. They have a dual responsibility to report their findings about waste and fraud inside their agencies to Congress and to their agency heads. Most experts think the inspectors general help prevent government scandal, but disputes over their independence seem to flare on a regular basis.

Most inspectors general are named to serve open-ended terms, but some serve only four or five years. Their ranks seem to turn over when parties switch control of the White House. Cooper's bill would seek to insulate them from political and agency pressure by providing the inspectors general with a seven-year term and the right to submit budget requests to Congress as well as to the White House budget office.

Towns asked Johnson if inspectors general had fallen into "cozy relationships" with senior agency officials and have avoided issuing reports that would make their agencies look bad. Johnson said that this was not the case and that the administration has openly distributed information about troublesome programs and issues, such as improper payments in the millions

of dollars that agencies make every year.

Phyllis K. Fong, the Agriculture Department inspector general who has served in inspector general positions in the Clinton and Bush administrations, said each inspector general has to decide how to work with the agency head. She said that she was "most comfortable with an arm's length relationship" with agency leaders.

As for Cooper's bill to enhance inspector general independence, Fong said there is "widespread support" among her peers for the major provisions.